

Understanding the Reproductive Cycle

Let's start with the stud, because he is less complicated. Dogs reach puberty between the ages of 6 and 10 months, and will develop sperm at this time. But, they are also still growing and do not even close their growth plates of the long bones until 9 months of age. Therefore, their body is still using a lot of nutrients and energy to grow. That is why your veterinarian recommends puppy food until they are a full year old. You can breed your male dog after puberty, but it is recommended to wait until after they are a year old. Of course, I recommend a semen evaluation before starting to breed to make sure he is producing healthy, motile sperm.

Now look at the female dog. Just like the males, they reach puberty at 6 to 10 months. Many times, you may not even realize that they have had a heat, because it is "silent." A silent heat is one in which they have minimal swelling and no bloody discharge. What are the usual signs of heat? An enlarged vulva, sometimes enlarged teats or change in temperament, and a bloody discharge. The discharge itself can vary from bitch to bitch in volume and coloration. Also, some females are good cleaners, and will lick themselves clean. You may not notice a discharge, but it may be possible for you to note an excess in grooming. The heat cycle itself is usually 3 weeks long, with heavy discharge for the first week, minimal discharge the second week (this is her fertile period), and more bleeding the last week. The bitch goes into heat approximately every 6 months. A great indicator of heat is any intact male dog within her radius! Because she is also still growing until a year, and she will have the burden of carrying babies, she should be at least 2 years old before breeding. Also, I do not recommend breeding on back-to-back heats, but give her a heat cycle to restore her strength and nutrients.

Timing the Breeding

As mentioned above, the bitch's fertile period is in the second week of her heat cycle. But, even for the most astute owners, it may be impossible to figure out the day that the heat started. Granted, the easiest way to determine the optimal breeding time is when the bitch will stand and let the stud mount her. If that happens and you have puppies- great! Recommended breeding is two good ties, 48 hours apart. This allows the stud to build up a good sperm count again. If you need help with timing, there are several ways that I can help determine ovulation. One way is doing vaginal smears, especially consecutive ones to see trends, and the cell shapes are distinctive once she is at optimal time for breeding. Also, a vaginoscopy can be done to look at the cervix and watch for changes that indicate time to breed. The best way to time a breeding is by running progesterone blood tests. They are expensive, but will give you the best chance of breeding at the right time, and will also allow me to exactly give you a due date for the pups. Special breedings, such as with chilled or frozen semen, **must** have progesterone timing done, because those semen samples have a short life-span. Multiple matings will ensure optimal litter size.